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M. H. Neuenschwander  
The Development of the Musical  
Festival in America the last  
Five Decades



THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MUSICAL  
FESTIVAL IN AMERICA THE LAST  
FIVE DECADES

BY

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THESIS

FOR THE

DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF MUSIC

IN

MUSIC

---

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

1920



1920  
N35

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

..... June 7 ..... 1930 .....

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

..... Milo Hugo Neuenschwander .....

ENTITLED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MUSICAL FESTIVAL IN AMERICA .....

..... THE LAST FIVE DECADES .....

IS APPROVED BY ME AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF Bachelor of Music .....

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153002



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One of the most striking features of the development of the music festivals in America the last fifty years has been the rise of a really great interest of people in becoming intimately acquainted with the great masterpieces of choral composition. The music festival today means so much that it has become a part of the life of thousands of citizens socially, economically, and popularly as well as musically. It is a democratic organization, a spirit which has made the music festival chorus, in its various forms and purposes, a unique institution. The great and worthy influence these festivals have exercised is indisputable.

To trace briefly the origin of the early era of musical festivals, it is necessary to go back to the days when the festival performances of the great Handel Commemoration were being held in London from 1784 to '87 and again in 1791. There were musical festivals before this time in England, but they were practically unknown on the Continent.

The efficiency of English choirs led Handel to turn his attention in the direction of writing for large choral bodies in his oratorios. Festival performances of Handel's oratorios were first given in Berlin on the London plan and were imitated in other German cities. Soon the works of other composers were performed in a similar manner. Since on such occasions there was always a fairly large orchestra, it was but natural that this body of instrumentalists was utilized in the performance of large orchestral works in conjunction with other features of the musical festival.

The United States has followed the example of England and Germany. Many festivals are held yearly with large choruses varying



in number of voices accompanied by from one to two hundred performers. These festivals have very much affected the mode of conducting and have done much towards establishing the universal custom of conducting by means of a baton.

In considering musical conditions after the Civil War, we learn that a decided earnest musical effort and interest arose. A change took place, and many musical societies were formed and organized for the development of a higher standard of music, as well as introducing choruses from the great Oratorios to be performed in limited series of concerts in the manner of the present day musical festival, only on a much smaller scale. The first great musical festival in America was the Peace Jubilee in the Fall of 1869, held in Boston, with a chorus of over ten thousand people, accompanied by an immense orchestra. The Festival extended throughout a full week, in which the greatest enthusiasm was maintained. Perhaps the greatest object lesson of the festival was the chorus of seven thousand school children giving a concert of simple music on the last day of the week. This festival differed from the present day festival in that the enormous chorus consisted of various choral societies from all over the East and Middle West, as far as Nebraska. This particular event, however, did give a new impulse in this country to the cause of choral singing and the real spirit of the musical festival.

From this time on the work of educating the masses to sing at sight went steadily forward, and efforts have ever since been continually directed to improving the musical taste of the people. As a result of the enthusiasm for the future choral concerts and developed musical festivals, sight singing and ear training were





undertaken in the Boston Public Schools and also in those of Dedham and Brooklyn, as well as at the New England Conservatory. This step resulted in the organization of various singing classes, which subsequently were converted into large choruses.

This work may be considered in some respect the most important movement since sight singing was established for the development of the musical festivals in America. Especially was such a purpose excellent because at this time it enabled people to enjoy the inspiration of choral singing, whose means and occupation prevented their gaining it in any other way. It also made it possible for them to continue the study which they began in the schools, and this enabled them more readily to appreciate the real atmosphere of the music festivals as it prevailed at succeeding festivals.

To this "revival" or musical awakening might be added the determination of the interested musicians of Worcester, Massachusetts, who as thinkers with a deeper sympathetic feeling towards the stronger emotions of festival music, at this time have to their credit the first important professional festival of the fall and winter season, if not one of the most important of the year, outside of Boston, New York, and Chicago.

In following the development of the American musical festival, the development of the Worcester festival presents a typical example of the inevitable ups and downs of fortune. During the earlier period, when the salaries exacted by artists were "as modest as the demands of the public", festivals, wherever conducted, almost invariably netted a comfortable surplus in the treasury. Since about 1880 the financial situation has changed. Statistics show that, for instance, in the case of the Worcester expenditure, ten



out of twenty festivals failed to pay expenses; more than that, the losses incurred in the bad years have exceeded the profits of the ten good years by nearly six thousand dollars. Having an endowment fund, the income from this fund has reduced the actual deficit somewhat, but the erratic succession of good years and bad with the eccentric variation of receipts has rendered precedents useless as a basis of financial calculations.

From the managerial viewpoint, however, the size of the expense account is no criterion for estimating profit or loss. For instance, the "record" year for economy for many festivals has probably been most disastrous in their entire series, while the years of heaviest expenditures have sometimes been among the most profitable. In considering profit and loss then, as regards the financial side of the festival development, there seem to be two important things to be taken into consideration, namely, the necessity of an endowment for the maintenance of any institution of art, especially where government or other definite support is lacking (unlike the case in Europe). Secondly, professional singers have marked up their prices to a point where one or two appearances cost as much as the five or six days hire of an orchestra. On the other hand, managements of musical festivals have to be careful not to engage a corps of manifestly low-priced artists because it has always been found to be the case that where such a policy has been pursued, logically the next season met with a proportionate reduction of receipts at the ticket office. The more desirable and profitable plan is to employ as evenly balanced a chorus as possible, one well adapted not merely for concert display, but for the solo roles of the large choral works.





Until about 1880 the music festival in style was a "convention" in fact as well as in name. Chorus and orchestra, and often even soloists, were in places volunteers. The rustic element, of course, was predominant. There were few rehearsals outside of festival week only for the double reason that the manager could not afford to pay the conductor for a longer period, and a majority of the chorus singers lived out of town. There were sessions forenoons, afternoons, and evenings for four or five days. The afternoon performance was an improvised concert when "contributors of vocal and instrumental music were expected and solicited from members, and also from the solo artists." While, for instance, one singer was doing her turn upon the stage, the managers were industriously hunting the hall for the "next candidate."

Gradually these social hours expanded into formal concerts, so that by 1892 the last of this type of concerts passed into history, greatly to the relief of the managers and the increasing dignity of the festival. The afternoon concerts are now built upon the symphony plan and are as important artistically as any. Certain days of the festivals became, so to say, reserved for certain artists, or choral performances, so that by custom, say, Thursday became reserved for the piano virtuoso, while on Friday afternoon the leading soprano soloist had her turn, the remainder of the time on both occasions being given to the orchestra. These came to be among the most profitable concerts of the week. The chorus, though, always has been the mainstay of the festival, and the reason for its existence.

The period between 1875 and 1880 proves to be a notable one for festival progress. The first complete performance of an



Oratorio was announced at Worcester. Rossini's "Stabat Mater" was given. Also did the same week witness the first serious festival orchestral concert. For years afterwards the Friday matinee was known as the "Symphony Concert," just as Friday evening came to be called "Oratorio Night"; and in time there were three such nights. "Artists Night" became, and is still, the money-maker, the show-time of "prime donne" and evening gowns.

One of the festival features before about 1880 was the frequent appearance of singing and instrumental clubs. With the development and availability of the festival symphony orchestra, that custom discontinued. Because of the support now given by the orchestra and a greater number of rehearsals warranted two to three complete oratorios during the festival. The more important classic and standard compositions, both orchestral and choral, were now performed. American composers also became recognized. Festival programs included a list of works of such composers as Mrs. Beach, MacDowell, Foote, Victor Herbert, Parker, Chadwick, and Paine.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, a "great wave of general social awakening" progressed rapidly in which the people as a whole were coming more and more to realization of the unique mingling of the races of the world. The music festival, by making many people co-workers, not only united strangers of different nationalities and made them feel the bond of brotherhood, but frequently united groups in a community who, although of like blood and of long residence together, had grown apart. People began to realize and utilize more of the rich heritage of the past which America possesses,--a heritage richer and more varied than that of any other nation in the world, because it represents the sum total





of their possessions. People began to consider and value the musical festival as another manifestation of that approach in education which we term "motor activity". Only as we do things can we claim to know them. "The ultimate end of every type of instruction is not primarily to make us know more or feel more, but to make us do more," and this opportunity became more evident as it offered itself in the festival.

Music, however, no longer allotted or confined itself strictly to choral, or orchestral works, but to festivals of various types and characteristics as well. Since music seems to be the most natural medium for the expression of the feelings of festive groups of people, the development of music festivals in general brought about such as the Thanksgiving, Christmas, Patriots' Day, and May Day festival, the last named of which contained pantomimic dancing, etc. There seemed to be a revival of music as it was applied in earlier days when music served as a means or stimulant to express any general feeling of the aroused being. In utilizing music in the various festivals, it should be observed that the part assigned to music varied with the type of the celebration. It was sometimes an incidental diversion introduced to vary the uniformity or lighten the heaviness of the proceedings; sometimes it served to accentuate or reinforce certain climaxes of the festival, again it assumed the dignity of the central and overshadowing factor in a great religious ceremony, such as the Solemn Mass; or it sometimes became the entire festival.

The peculiar power of music seems to afford an expressive and fusing agent in the festival. It is here to operate upon two elements, namely, the performers and the audience, who are distinguished



as participators and onlookers. In the historic folk festival, this distinction did not exist, since all were participators. Consequently, all entered and alike were filled with the spirit of the festivity. To envelop all within the "folds of actual experience", to fuse doer and onlooker, as far as possible, is perhaps the supreme "mission" of music.

As music in its relation to the performers may be used in numberless ways, ranging from the obvious dragging in of a song, for the sake of variety, to the skilful interweaving of vocal and instrumental material so that it becomes a necessary part of the whole dramatic fabric, so festival music, largely through the principle of association of ideas, was now used to create interest and local atmosphere of time and place. Frequently the musical prelude served to suggest the mood of what was to follow as regards the festival's historic period, locality, or characters as they were represented.

In the numerous Thanksgiving or Autumn festivals, two elements entered into the music: the one, rollicking rejoicing; the other, thoughtful religious gratitude. Thus the vigorous Harvest Home Songs, and the quiet psalm of thanksgiving were sung. Closely allied with the harvest idea is the American Thanksgiving, recalling the early struggles of the Pilgrims. Parts of Longfellow's "Hiawatha" have been used in this connection, which is appropriate in scenes showing Indian life as it touched the early English settlements. For the Christmas festivals, singing has always been a very important factor in the Yuletide celebration. The large audiences which year after year have welcomed christmas carols and performances of Handel's "Messiah" have proven the interest in the





musical powers of the oratorio and the season's celebration.

Of special importance, about two decades ago, was the development of the festival plan in schools. "May Day" became more commonly observed in the form of a festival in which the primary characteristics grew to be songs of joy over the new life, and the dance giving expression of rejoicing over the advent of Spring. An enthusiastic spirit prevailed, while unusual opportunities were offered for the development of the principles underlying the school festivals which have become more and more valuable features in the life of communities in that they created and developed a more intelligent and genuine appreciation of the real value of worthy music.

Along with the interest created by the school festivals, the development of the musical festival has become a means of "public enterprise" bringing zest, variety, and taste into the life of some of the rural districts. One of the main results of the festivals has been to bring together social elements of various types. For example, the Norfolk Musical Festival is typical of what the American musical festivals have accomplished within the past fifteen years in stimulating a general musical interest, as well as raising the standard of taste in whatever community such festivals continue to take place.

Like most big things, these community musical festivals have been growing in a natural way from a very small beginning. In the case of the Litchfield, Connecticut, County Choral Union, we learn of this Union having its beginning in the form of an organized glee club under the direction of Dr. Stoeckel, after his retirement from Yale University. A brief history of the growth and influence of this Union will illustrate fairly well what the Festival in time



meant to a community. Within thirteen years after the before-mentioned glee club was organized, the Union became a choral society of five large choirs from neighboring towns, so that by 1912 the combined chorus of four hundred and sixteen mixed voices, picked from an available total of more than seven hundred, included in the membership of the Litchfield County Choral Union, gave a series of concerts during festival week before audiences of over eight thousand people.

The great interest of these festivals was also duly augmented by the assistance of a first class symphony orchestra of about eighty pieces and nearly a dozen well known vocal and instrumental soloists, among them such artists as Alma Gluck, Maud Powell, and Kathleen Parlow. George Chadwick and Victor Hubert came to the Norfolk Festival for the express purpose of conducting their own works. The development of the festival spirit had in this case heightened the intense interest in the community's musical opportunities that the management engaged special trains to carry the singers to Norfolk from all over the neighboring country and back home. That the festival spirit arouses a great inclination for the more desirable type and standard of music is evident as shown by the record of attendance at the weekly rehearsals, which in places have really become, in themselves, an "event" of weekly recurrence.

Another "musical pilgrimage" for its rural communities is the University of Michigan. This school is perhaps one of the earliest in the Middle West to engage in an annual festival. Co-education has made it possible for Ann Arbor to enjoy one of the largest student choruses in the world. The auditorium, built in 1913, and used for the festivals, has a larger seating capacity than the





Metropolitan Opera House in New York. During the week of the festival, peach-growers and sugar-beet planters of the region come flocking into town by almost every imaginable way to enjoy the music festival. Thus the interest in such concerts and festivals perhaps partly explains why in such communities almost every home has purchased a piano, and music departments in various libraries have become effectively developed.

To follow the spread of the "festival epidemic", as a certain writer terms the development within the last few years before the War, from coast to coast would be almost impossible. In Maine there have been regular festivals for a good many years, with centres in Bangor and Portland. They are very big and well-conducted affairs, with a mammoth chorus, a large orchestra and soloists of international reputation. Similar in type are the South Atlantic States musical festivals held at Birmingham and Spartansburg for the past twenty years. Chicago has had elaborate musical festivals. The Cincinnati May Festival has probably been the greatest influence in stirring up interest in choral singing throughout the Middle-West and the West. Then there are the festivals of Youngstown, Indianapolis, Albany and Buffalo; farther West, the Kansas Farmers' Easter Festival; and also festivals in Los Angeles, Seattle, and Bellingham on the coast.

According to Daniel Gregory Mason, there are two festivals which seem to stand out from all the others by virtue of their origin and the nature of their activities. The older of these is the Norfolk Festival, of which the writer has already given a brief account. Dr. Mason says that, "The purpose of this Choral Union has been a very useful one, and it has had the effect of raising materi-



ally the standard of the choral work among the small societies composing the union. The value of these festivals to all the choral societies and church choirs composing the Litchfield County Union is obvious, but they have a still wider and greater value in introducing to the world the creations of native American composers and in holding up an example of fine artistic idealism which must be of great influence on the soul of the nation." The other of the two festivals of peculiar interest is the MacDowell Festival, held annually since 1910, at Peterborough, New Hampshire, under the auspices of the Edward MacDowell Association. Edward MacDowell did some of his best and most characteristic work in a log cabin on his farm at Peterborough, "surrounded by enormous pines facing through a lovely vista Monadnock and the setting sun." Realizing the value to a creative artist of such inspiring surroundings, he conceived the idea of bequeathing the place as a centre for artists seeking congenial conditions for work and rest. After his death the property was transferred by Mrs. MacDowell to the MacDowell Memorial Association. Consequently, the MacDowell Festival, which is a sort of annual "get-together-party", is predominantly a musical event, though the drama and the dance have their share in it. This festival is especially valuable as the free expression of aesthetic aspiration unshackled by enchained barriers of commercialism; and secondarily as a reasonably good opportunity for the American composer to obtain a public hearing.

One should not omit here a notice of the musical side of the pageant movement which by now has grown to marked proportions in America, at first in conjunction with musical festivals, and finally developed into a musical art-form complete. With regard to the





musical side of the pageant as a distinct development in America, William Chauncy Longdon says, "So far as I know in no English pageant has there been any attempt to recognize the pageant as a new musical art-form in itself and to develop the music as an art-unit, comparable to the sonata, symphony, or opera. The formative idea, or precedent, is to be found in the chorus of the Greek drama set to music. But thus far, so far as I know, my pageants are the only ones that regard the pageant as a musical as well as dramatic art-form and seek to work out its development as such."

Thus it seems as if the new pageant is one of the most interesting developments in American art, and it is especially interesting to note it as a distinctly American idea particularly well calculated, one would think, to be an effective means for the expression of the American spirit. Of course, we realize that its history lies rather in the future than in the past. Even though it has developed a distinctive form of its own, in the main it contains, and still maintains a great deal of the festival characteristics and spirit.

Municipal music has exerted considerable power to develop the music festival spirit. In New York, in 1910, for instance, the People's Choral Union, conducted by Frank Damrosch, and the New York Symphony Orchestra, gave a joint concert which proved very popular and of fundamental importance in the truly national development of the musical festival spirit. It is an established rule of the People's Choral Union that a certain per cent of the program shall contain compositions of American composers. This is a step toward the recognition of the composers of our own land as a factor in the creation of America's dawning musical democracy. The American composer, ultimately will see most deeply the musical need of the



American musical festivals, and will, at least in combination with other recognized compositions, satisfy the need and the standards of music desired at the various festivals. New York has planned and participated in expressive music, dance, and song festivals for nearly two decades for the national holidays and other special important occasions. It is particularly for such occasions that the nation's composers and artists are called upon to help organize and develop festivals.

Before entering upon the discussion of the music festivals during our participation in the world war, it is worth our while to take note of the Bach Festival at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in following the development of the American festivals. Here "the music of the Old Master is performed and worshipped midst the glories of Nature". Here is a community chorus especially interested in studying and performing the most serious type of religious music. In studying and giving the Bach chorals, choruses from his cantatas, and the difficult Passion Music according to St. John, and the great B Minor Mass, a sense of appreciation and love of such an important type of church-festival music, and revenue for the composer thereof is developed of whom Henry T. Finck of New York says, "Bach is modern, Bach is human, Bach is big. He is a volcano that reared its head two centuries ago, above the highest level of nineteenth century music. When Mozart for the first time came across one of Bach's works, he exclaimed rapturously: "Here at last is something from which I can learn."

The annual North Shore Music Festival held at Evanston plays an important part in the musical life of the country. Here the A Capella Choir does capital work in every respect, usually scores a





huge and well-deserved success in giving a splendid account of itself in the presentation of that style of ensemble, which when creditably performed, affords a deep musical impression to appreciative listeners, an effect which can in no other way be acquired.

In the April Festival, 1916, Mahler's Eighth Symphony, the "Symphony of a Thousand", is accredited to the enterprise and initiative of the Society of Friends of Music, Philadelphia, which comprised the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, greatly augmented, five choral organizations, aggregating 950 voices, and an octet of picked soloists. In nature this elongated and bulky cantata stands out much more as an outward show and theatrical event than any other non-operatic performance. Even though the difference between cost and receipts was considerable, the Friends of Music cheerfully shouldered the burden and paid the deficit out of their own pockets, thus manifesting a genuine altruistic spirit.

During the recent World War against the Central Powers in Europe, we found an unusual enthusiastic and optimistic attitude toward the festival spirit. Musical festivals were very fittingly being held. The enemy was made to realize that American morale, American spirit, and American idealism could not be halted or hindered. This country was not ready, nor will it ever be ready, to yield to a force that seeks to undermine high aspiration. Artillery and instruments of war cannot substitute art, and this we made manifest to Germany. For instance, at the Cincinnati May Festival, "the note of unquenchable patriotism was sounded at the very opening of its festive week when the chorus of one thousand singers, the Cincinnati Orchestra, and the audience of over four thousand persons joined in a heart-warming rendering of 'The Star Spangled Banner'."



In spite of the general withdrawal of patronage from most amusement enterprises, the crowds at the various music festivals remained undiminished and, at the various music festivals throughout the country, in spite of a depleted men's chorus, on account of war requirements, the average of choral work remained high and in the matter of works presented and soloists selected to interpret them, most of the usual festivals lived up to their reputation.

Special patriotic music festivals were given for the purpose of raising funds for various kinds of War Relief. In Cincinnati seats for the festival were auctioned off, the prices ranging from five dollars to thirty-five hundred dollars per seat. Various novel ways of raising money were engaged in at the various festivals throughout the country. For instance, the New York Mozart Society put its shoulders to the wheel in standing behind the Government by means of Liberty Loan Musical Festivals. The spirit of the time was being reflected at festivals all over the United States, a description of which would require a great deal of space. One must not forget that the war time development and success of the music festival which were so effective and indispensable during the war in maintaining a necessary morale and raising huge sums of money for the Government were to a large degree due to the wonderful and generous co-operation of our enthusiastic and patriotic artists.

As soon as possible after the Armistice, the music festival sought to establish a pre-war aspect and attitude. At Rue Marbeuf, Champs-Flysées, Paris, April 21, 1919, a French-American Music Festival was held on an enormous scale. Seven performances were given, part of which were for the benefit of the liberated regions of France. After this enormous and impressive festival, the various





French musical societies, after again recovering, as far as possible former members, had a great desire to reorganize and again maintain independent organizations. This festival also did much, besides producing a thrilling effect, to arouse an enthusiastic and sympathetic feeling amongst the boys of the American Expeditionary Force for the support and development of the music festival spirit in America; a spirit which now manifestly shows its growth as never before in the history of the festivals. Last May, many of them were appropriately given in the manner of grateful Peace Jubilees.

There seems to be established a new artistic standard beyond anything attained in previous seasons. Never before has there been so much interest in evidence by music lovers indicating a degree of appreciation unusually gratifying, especially to those who labor so diligently for the success of the music festival.

In our unbiased observation then of the development of the American musical festival in its present day "zenith" as exemplified but a few weeks ago in an elaborate and well organized five-day round of musical events by the New York Oratorio Society, assisted, if not "fortified" by the choral societies of Brooklyn, Jersey City, The Bach Choir of Bethlehem, the augmented New York Symphony Orchestra, and many preeminent artists, the comparison is interesting and the contrast marked with those sponsored a generation back by Leopold Damrosch, Theodore Thomas, and Patrick Gilmore, when organized musical entertainment was haphazard and intermittent.

The music festival, one can feel, wherever it takes place and is seriously undertaken, at least develops an appreciation and desire for the better elements in music because of the best that music offers is usually given at the music festival, and local as well as national "appetite for music does actually grow by what it feeds on."



We should, however, during the present period of transition and readjustment, not overemphasize and become overly satisfied of the success and achievement of the war-time and post-war development of the festival. Not only "to live on what we have, but on what we remember and what we hope." Past efforts should only more fully incite and spur us for a desire of better things to reappear and to inspire the participants therein to higher standards and broader fields.





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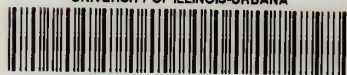
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